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OCI No. 0476/76
March 5, 1976

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Status of the Moroccan-Algerian Dispute

Introduction

The Moroccan-Algerian dispute over the Sahara is still marked by diplomatic wrangling over the legal status of the territory and continuing low-level guerrilla operations by the Algerian-backed Polisario Front. Neither side sought to escalate the conflict following the clashes between Moroccan and Algerian regulars inside the Sahara in late January, and there are no indications that either Algiers or Rabat is deliberately seeking an all-out confrontation. Algiers seems to be concentrating on pursuing a two-track policy of attempting to secure UN and international censure of the Moroccan-Mauritanian takeover while continuing to develop the Polisario into a credible military and political force. The Moroccans are continuing to consolidate their hold over the territory and so far have obtained support for their position from the key Arab states. Neither Rabat nor Algiers shows any inclination to compromise, and the Arab effort to mediate the dispute so far has failed.

Over the next few months at least, Algiers is likely to step up its military and logistical support for the Polisario. The Moroccans should be able to both defend the towns under their control and to mount counterinsurgency operations inside the Sahara. In an effort to expand their area of operations, the Polisario are likely to concentrate their major efforts against the weaker Mauritanian forces in southern Sahara and northeastern Mauritania. Algiers will increase its political and economic pressure on Nouakchott in an effort to drive a wedge between Morocco and Mauritania and to force Mauritania to abandon its claim to the southern Sahara.

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Diplomatic Wrangling

Morocco and Mauritania have assumed de facto control over the Sahara. Spain's role as co-administrator of the disputed territory under the tripartite agreement it concluded with Rabat and Nouakchott ended last week. The legal status of the territory, however, remains a contentious issue. Madrid insists that its transfer of administrative control does not resolve the question of sovereignty. Algeria, which has rejected the tripartite agreement entirely, continues to demand a referendum on self-determination.

Morocco previously had argued that the Saharans were consulted via the territorial assembly last November. Nonetheless, Rabat convened another special meeting of the Moroccan-dominated assembly on February 26 to "express the will of the people." Rabat argues that the assembly's unanimous approval of a motion to integrate the territory into Morocco and Mauritania meets the requirement for consultations called for in the pro-Moroccan resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly last December that, in effect, endorsed the tripartite accord.

Rabat's gambit to dispose of the troublesome consultation process has satisfied no one but the Moroccans. UN Secretary General Waldheim declined a Moroccan invitation to send an observer to the territorial assembly session. Spain wants to avoid any association with the Moroccan scheme and has disclaimed all responsibility for future developments in the Sahara. Algiers denounced the assembly's action and is playing up the UN's refusal to sanction the meeting.

The Polisario Front countered the assembly's endorsement of the Moroccan-Mauritanian takeover by announcing on February 27 the formation of the "Democratic Saharan Arab Republic." The Front controls little territory, however, and has, in effect, set up a government-in-exile. Algiers

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undoubtedly hopes that formation of a Polisario "government"-will strengthen the Front's political credentials and forestall international recognition of the Moroccan-Mauritanian takeover.

The Algerians also are working to keep the Sahara dispute alive at the United Nations. They will try to exploit the UN's unwillingness to accept the Sahara assembly's action as a proper consultation of the Saharan people and the pessimistic report of a UN envoy who visited the Sahara recently to push once again for a referendum on self-determination.

Meanwhile, Polisario guerrillas continue to mount harassing actions in southern Morocco, the Sahara, and northern Mauritania. Estimates of the number of Polisario combatants range from 1,000 to 5,000 but we doubt that there are more than 2,000-3,000 active guerrillas. The Front depends heavily on Algeria for training, supplies, and financial support.

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Algeria Loses The First Round

Although Algerian efforts to prevent the Moroccan-Mauritanian takeover of the Sahara have failed, the Boumediene government refuses to accept the takeover as a fait accompli. Algiers opposes Moroccan absorption of the northern Sahara, with its rich phosphate desposts, because this could reduce Algerian predominance in North Africa.

President Boumediene has invested considerable prestige in the Sahara dispute. Acceptance of Moroccan-Mauritanian control of the territory would mean admitting humiliating defeat by King Hassan. The Boumediene regime would survive such a setback, but it is unwilling to swallow such a bitter pill.

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Algeria does not seem to want a direct military confrontation with Morocco, but it almost certainly will continue to support Polisario guerrilla warfare in the Sahara. The Algerians believe that time works in favor of liberation movements and hope the Moroccans will be bogged down fighting a long and costly insurgency. Having made a political decision to back the formation of a Polisario "government," Algiers may also be willing to support an increased level of guerrilla operations.

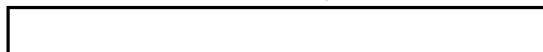
Algerian Constraints

Although Algiers, perhaps with some continued support from Libya, can finance a sustained insurgency effort, Algeria's economic development needs are a major constraint against Boumediene's pursuing an all-out confrontation with Morocco. In 1975, Algiers borrowed heavily abroad to sustain its ambitious development program and to finance its payments deficit. The Algerians were forced to turn to wealthier Arab states for large-scale financial support and probably will do so again this year. Saudi Arabia provided \$400 million in balance of payments support, a contribution that helped the Algerians out of a short-term currency bind.

Diplomatic support for Algeria's position in the Sahara dispute has been less than Algiers expected. Among the Arab states, only Libya and South Yemen publicly support Algiers. Africans are divided on the issue; the recent OAU ministerial meeting in Addis Ababa side-stepped the question of recognizing the Front either as a liberation movement or a government. Algerian lobbying at the UN last fall produced mixed results. Although the General Assembly adopted a pro-Algerian resolution on the Sahara by a wide majority, it also passed a second pro-Moroccan resolution that in effect endorsed the tripartite agreement.

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Concern over the possibility of a conflict with Morocco prompted the Algerians [redacted] to seek additional military assistance. Algiers

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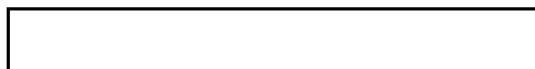


Morocco Settles In

With the Sahara in his grasp, King Hassan is unwilling to consider a political compromise that would dilute his control of northern Sahara. Almost all Moroccans, including those who oppose the King's autocratic style of rule, have supported Hassan's campaign. He has mortgaged his own future to securing the territory and will not give it up.

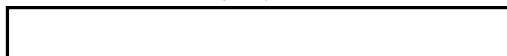
At the same time, Hassan cannot afford to risk an all-out military confrontation with Algeria. He recognizes Morocco's overall military inferiority

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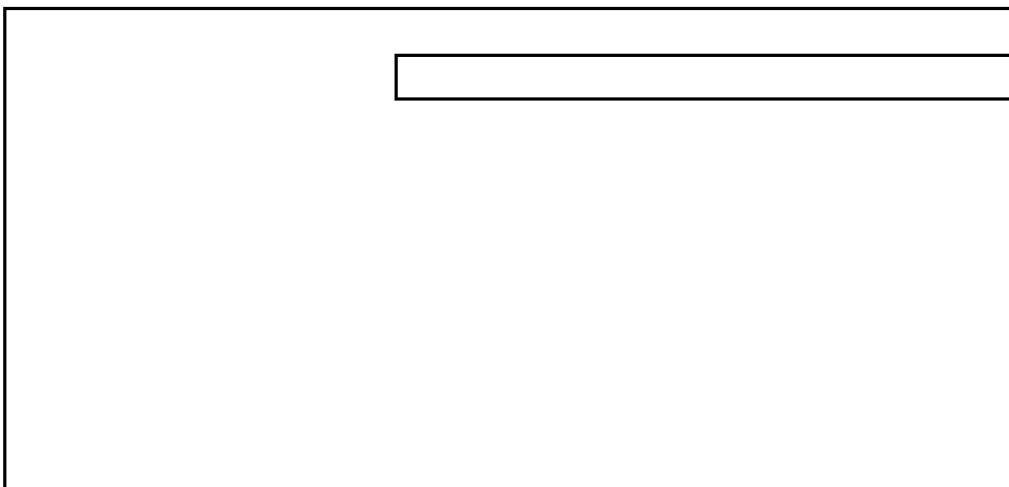


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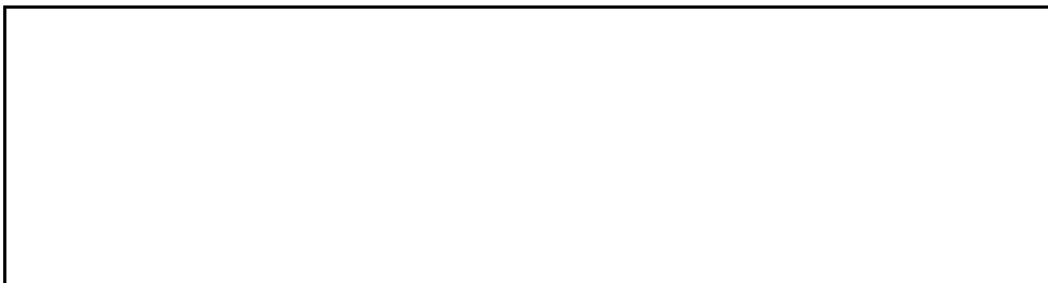
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Morocco has had some success in securing diplomatic support in its dispute with Algeria over the Sahara. While some Arab states have avoided taking a public position in the dispute, several, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, have indicated their support to Rabat.

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Moroccan concern about its weaker military posture vis-a-vis Algeria has generated requests to the US to accelerate arms deliveries provided for under a long-term military modernization program. The program, designed to equip two mechanized brigades, establish a radar network to support an air defense system, and provide a second squadron of F-5 aircraft, was initiated in 1974. Delivery dates have been advanced for some M-48 tanks, armored personnel carriers, and some air-to-air and anti-tank missiles.

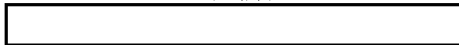


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Mauritania Faces Trouble

Mauritania, the smallest and weakest party to the Sahara dispute, is in the most vulnerable position. The Polisario Front has directed a large part of its guerrilla effort at Mauritania's weak, poorly equipped and trained, and largely inexperienced armed forces. Algiers has exerted pressure on Nouakchott through caustic propaganda attacks and hostile economic actions

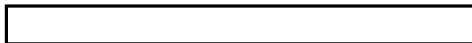
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Algerian and Polisario pressure tactics are clearly intended to drive a wedge between Rabat and Nouakchott and ultimately to force Mauritania to abandon its role in Sahara.

Nouakchott, at least in the short run, will continue to follow Rabat's lead in the hope of obtaining a share of the Sahara. It is expanding its small army of 1300 men, but so far has had only limited success in isolated clashes with the guerrillas. In larger encounters with Polisario forces, the Mauritaniens have usually sought and obtained Moroccan ground and air support.

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Mauritania, with its limited resources, cannot afford a long and costly struggle against the Polisario. Nouakchott may eventually seek a way out of the dispute to avoid heavy casualties, domestic ferment over the wisdom of its Sahran venture, and an economic disaster. The principal alternatives to a long struggle are to arrange an accomodation with the Front, possibly entailing some form of shared administration in the southern Sahara, or, if all else fails, to pull out of the Sahara altogether.

Military Buildup Continues

During the past several months Rabat has called up reservists to form about a dozen new battalions; these units probably will be sent to areas formerly manned by units now deployed to the Sahara. Morocco has 10,000 to 15,000 troops in northern Sahara and about the same number across the border in southern Morocco. All 14 of Morocco's flyable F-5 fighters--out of a total inventory of 19--are in southern Morocco or northern Sahara; northern Moroccan air space is virtually defenseless.

Algeria has continued to strengthen its forces along its western border with Morocco and in the tri-border area adjacent to the Sahara. This year's draftees were called up six months ahead of schedule. Algiers is believed to have formed a new motorized brigade in northwestern Algeria and has deployed a squadron of MIG-21 fighters in the same general area. Since last fall, the Algerians have built up their forces between Bechar and Tindouf from some 10,000 troops to about 15,000 men; [REDACTED]

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Evolution of the Dispute

The most likely course of developments is continued tension between Morocco and Algeria and a sustained insurgency effort by the Polisario Front. Neither Hassan nor Boumediene has yet indicated a willingness to compromise.

Morocco will be able to contain, but not eliminate, Polisario guerrilla activity in Sahara and southern Morocco. A counterinsurgency effort to control the present level of guerrilla harassment will be a severe though probably tolerable drain on Morocco's resources. Algeria will be able to sustain its commitment to a "national liberation struggle" at a relatively small cost. Mauritania may opt out of the dispute in the face of the heavy drain on its limited resources. Various Arab mediators are likely to continue their efforts to reduce military tensions between Rabat and Algiers.

A negotiated settlement of the dispute is unlikely in the short run, but an eventual political solution cannot be ruled out. Algiers would have to settle for limited consultations with the Saharan people that did not alter Moroccan control. Rabat would have to accept at least a token exercise of self-determination and possibly establish a special administration that provided a facade of local self-government. A negotiated settlement in the foreseeable future likely would involve greater political costs and loss of personal prestige for Boumediene than for Hassan.

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The possibility of serious clashes between Moroccan and Algerian forces will increase if either leader perceives a raising of the ante in their dispute. Algiers might again send into the Sahara some regular army units to support Polisario operations, as was in the case in late January when fighting occurred at the Saharan oasis of Amgala.

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If major fighting does break out, it would most likely be confined to the Sahara and along the long Moroccan-Algerian border. Both sides would encounter logistic problems in sustained fighting. Arab mediators would intervene quickly to establish a cease-fire. In the unlikely event of a full-scale war, the Moroccans would have an initial advantage in the Sahara, while the Algerians would be able to seize territory along the Moroccan-Algerian frontier. Algeria's forces are clearly superior to Morocco's in virtually every category of medium and heavy weapons, especially jet fighters, and in time probably would be able to inflict a humiliating defeat on Morocco.

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Arab Reactions

The Arabs will continue periodic efforts to mediate the dispute and will step in quickly to keep the lid on any hostilities between Morocco and Algeria. No matter what course the Sahara dispute follows, including even major hostilities, it is likely to have few repercussions elsewhere in the Arab world.

The dispute seems to be regarded by the other Arabs more as a nuisance than as an opportunity for advancement of a "cause," and the large majority of the Arabs simply wish the problem would go away. Most Arabs do not support either side with particular enthusiasm, and the dispute has not caused a polarization among the Arab states, as might be expected in a stand-off between a "reactionary" and a "progressive" regime. For example, "progressive" Syria and Iraq sympathize not with Algeria, as would be expected, but with Morocco.

The Arabs, in short, have their own interests rather than "principle" uppermost in mind in the Sahara dispute, and they are unlikely to allow their broader policies to be affected by their Moroccan and Algerian colleagues' problems.

Soviet Role

The Soviet Union has sought to avoid direct entanglement in the Spanish Sahara conflict because it would force Moscow to choose between Morocco and Algeria--two states with which it wants to maintain good relations.

The Soviets place more importance on their relationship with Algiers, because they view Algeria as a "progressive state" and because they have a long standing military assistance relationship with it. Nevertheless, Moscow's public support for Algeria's position favoring

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self-determination for the Spanish Sahara has been restrained. Moreover, Moscow recognizes that Algeria has been an inconstant friend, resistant to Soviet pressure, and it wants to protect its significant economic dealings with Rabat. For these reasons, the Soviets have moved slowly in delivering promised arms to Algiers and have not blessed the Polisario Front as a legitimate national liberation movement.

If war were to break out between Algeria and Morocco, the Soviets would couple efforts to end the conflict with political support for Algeria. Moscow probably would also make at least a limited effort to resupply Algerian arsenals. Nevertheless, Moscow would not be anxious to underwrite an all-out Algerian military effort against Rabat; it would not be sure of the outcome, particularly if it believed Soviet military support to Algiers would lead to increased US support to Rabat. Moscow, however, would intensify its support for Algiers if it thought the US was moving first to increase military shipments to Rabat.

US Role

Whatever position the US takes in the Sahara dispute will be criticized by either Rabat or Algiers. King Hassan will continue to press Washington for accelerated arms deliveries and additional military sales, as well as more visible political support for Morocco. If fighting with Algeria erupts, Hassan would exert intense pressure on the US for emergency military resupply.

Algeria has condemned Morocco's military relationship with the US and major new US arms sales or emergency resupply of Morocco in the event of hostilities would be viewed by Algiers

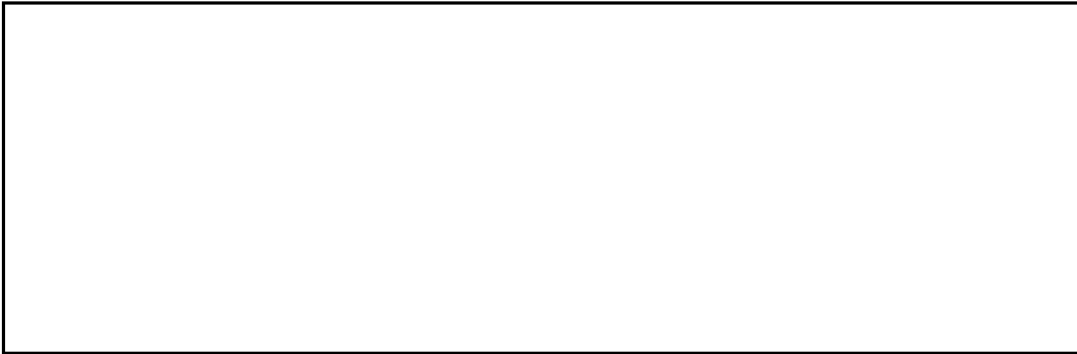
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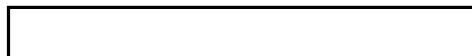
as a serious provocation. Bilateral political relations, already strained by the Sahara dispute, could reach the breaking point. Although Algiers values highly its economic ties with the US to obtain badly needed capital and technology, some form of economic retaliation, such as refusing new purchases of natural gas, cannot be ruled out.



French Interests

France has taken a pro-Moroccan stand on the Sahara issue, but it also wants to remain on good terms with Algeria. Paris hopes to preserve its considerable economic relations with both countries. The French recognize the prominent role Algeria plays among developing countries--a group with which they want to develop closer ties--but they do not want Algeria's influence strengthened, especially at Morocco's expense.

President Giscard d'Estaing has offered to play a mediating role in the Sahara dispute if asked by both sides. If serious fighting develops between Morocco and Algeria, Paris is likely to repeat its offer. The French might also agree to expedite delivery of previously ordered equipment to the Moroccans.



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Foreign Involvement

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There is circumstantial evidence that Havana is providing the Front with some material support. It is quite possible that some Cubans in Algeria are aiding Polisario guerrillas as advisers. We doubt that more than a dozen or so have gone into the Sahara or that they have actually participated in guerrilla operations. It seems unlikely that significant Cuban involvement would be required by Polisario or desired by Algiers; Cuba would almost certainly respect Algeria's wishes.

While the Boumediene government has sought diplomatic support, verbal backing, and material aid for Polisario activities, it has kept the matter almost exclusively a Saharan-Algerian affair and will probably continue to do so. The Algerians are experts at desert guerrilla warfare, drawing on their years of experience against the French, and they do not have a military requirement, at least, for foreign advisers.

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